

LIBERIA 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Liberia is a constitutional republic with a bicameral national assembly and a democratically elected government led by President George Manneh Opong Weah and the political alliance Coalition for Democratic Change. The country held presidential and legislative elections in 2017, which domestic and international observers deemed generally free and fair. The then Montserrado County Senator George Weah won the presidential runoff in December 2017 in an election that was generally considered free and fair. In December 2020 the country held midterm senatorial elections that observers deemed largely peaceful, although there were some reported instances of vote tampering, intimidation, harassment of female candidates, and election violence. Opposition and independent candidates won 12 of the 15 Senate seats contested, according to election results announced by the National Election Commission. On November 16, by-elections for the House of Representatives were held in Bong, Bomi, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh counties to fill vacancies created after the December 2020 midterm senatorial elections. Once again, election observers deemed the proceedings largely peaceful, although there were some reported instances of vote tampering, intimidation, harassment of female candidates, and election violence.

The Liberia National Police maintain internal security, with assistance from the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency and other civilian security forces. The Armed Forces of Liberia are responsible for external security but also have some domestic security responsibilities if called upon. The Liberia National Police and Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency report to the Ministry of Justice, while the Armed Forces of Liberia report to the Ministry of National Defense. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary killings by police; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by police; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; restrictions on freedom of the press,

including violence, intimidation and threats against journalists resulting in self-censorship, and unjustified arrests of journalists; serious government corruption; lack of investigation and accountability for gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation/cutting; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons; the existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and existence of the worst forms of child labor.

Impunity continued for individuals who committed human rights abuses, including atrocities during the two Liberian civil wars, as multiple investigative and audit reports were ignored. The government made intermittent but limited attempts to investigate and prosecute officials accused of current abuses, whether in the security forces or elsewhere in the government. Impunity continued for government corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

On July 29, truck driver Alieu Sheriff was involved in a scuffle with on-duty police officers after his truck was impounded along the Gardnersville Japan Highway in Montserrado County where the Ministry of Transport and Liberia National Police were conducting a joint inspection of non-roadworthy vehicles. According to witnesses, police officers beat and dragged Sheriff from the National Transportation Authority. Sheriff was later found unconscious and taken to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead. On August 31, the Liberia National Police arrested and forwarded to court three police officers, Samuel, N. Borbor, Harris Monger, and Alexander Seakour, after Sheriff's autopsy showed he died of blunt force trauma. Borbor and Seakour were charged with negligent homicide and criminal facilitation. In September the Liberia National Police delivered the three officers to the Monrovia City Court for prosecution in connection with the

killing. The three police officers were detained at the Monrovia Central Prison pending a criminal trial.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. The public and media continued to allege unresolved disappearances (see section 6, Other Societal Violence or Discrimination).

On April 5, scores of mourners under the banner Citizens United Against Secret Killings called on diplomatic missions to help end an alleged wave of mysterious disappearances, deaths and “secret killings” in the country, ostensibly linked to traditional ritualistic practices. Addressing a news conference in Monrovia, the group’s leader Jethro Emmanuel Kolleh noted that residents were living in fear because of the unexplainable deaths. In press events and community outreach, the national police inspector general denied the reports of a wave of disappearances related to ritualistic killings, noting that the public seemed to be linking cases of domestic violence, robberies, and even suicides to ritual violence and that some photographs of purported disappeared or deceased individuals circulating on social media were fake or misleading. On September 10, the chairperson of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, T. Dempster Brown, ordered field monitors of the commission to commence investigation into the August 2 disappearance of Sayon Moore, a compliance enforcement officer assigned to the Real Estate Division at the Liberia Revenue Authority, among others. The commission said the launch of the investigation marked the beginning of an independent investigation into disappearances and related deaths.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices. The penal code provides criminal penalties for excessive use of force by law enforcement officers and addresses permissible uses of force during arrest or while preventing the escape of a prisoner from custody. An armed forces disciplinary board investigates alleged misconduct and abuses by military personnel. The armed forces administer nonjudicial punishment. In accordance with a memorandum of understanding between the

Ministries of Justice and Defense, the armed forces refer capital cases to the civil court system for adjudication.

There were media reports that government authorities allegedly abused, harassed, and intimidated persons in custody, as well as those seeking protection. In April the Liberia Drug Enforcement Agency dismissed an officer captured on a Facebook video on March 25 choking a suspected drug dealer and kneeling on his head while he and other officers attempted to arrest and handcuff the man. The agency said it was terminating Jeremiah Johnson, deputy commander for operations in Margibi County, because his actions as captured in the video were unprofessional. The agency's information and communication officer, Michael Jipply, said the commander's dismissal followed an investigation by a board of inquiry.

Residents, especially in Monrovia and its environs, alleged physical abuse by police officers enforcing COVID-19 restrictions and mask mandates, including beatings with canes, being forced to hold uncomfortable positions, and other harsh treatment. The Liberia National Police defended its COVID-19-related enforcement but warned officers against using the restrictions to abuse or extort the public and encouraged the public to report such abuses.

Impunity was a problem in the security forces. In both its August and December reports, the Independent National Human Rights Commissions stated that police and other security officers allegedly abused, harassed, and intimidated persons in police custody, as well as those seeking police protection. Allegations of police harassment or abuse were referred to the Professional Standards Division of the Liberia National Police or its equivalent. A Civilian Complaint Review Board, which includes representatives of nongovernmental organizations, is empowered by law to review complaints against the Liberia National Police and Liberia Immigration Service and did so regularly.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, inadequate sanitary conditions, and poor medical care.

Physical Conditions: Gross overcrowding continued to be a problem. Twelve of

the country's 16 prison facilities were overcrowded. The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported the prison population in the country's 16 facilities as of December 8 stood at 2,925 inmates, with the Monrovia Central Prison, originally built for 374 detainees, holding 1,407 inmates. According to the Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation, prison overcrowding was due to prolonged pretrial detention. A moratorium on jury trials in effect from March 2020 to November 8 due to COVID-19 restrictions and the closure of the Harper Central Prison facility following its destruction by a mob in March exacerbated overcrowding problems. On August 9, during remarks on the opening of the August Term of Court, Zuballah Kizeku, judge of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court of Gbarpolu County in the western region of the country, claimed an "increasing wave of wrongful arrests" by law enforcement agents was responsible for the overcrowding of prisons around the country.

The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Rural Human Rights Activists Programme noted that male and female prisoners were held in separate cell blocks in prison facilities across the country. In large prison facilities, juveniles and adults were held in separate cell blocks, but in smaller prisons where juvenile detention was rare, separate cells were provided in the same cell block for juveniles and adults. The bureau continued to request the establishment of multiple separate juvenile reformatory facilities for proper juvenile rehabilitation. In some instances pretrial detainees and convicts were held in the same cell block but in separate cells. Prison authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) noted that juveniles were sometimes held in pretrial detention. Prison conditions varied by the gender of inmates. In general the lower number of female prisoners made it easier to meet their specific needs.

The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Rural Human Rights Activists Programme reported 15 prison deaths through September. According to the bureau, many death certificates provided by referral centers reported deaths from natural illnesses, including hypertension, diabetes, and tuberculosis. The bureau noted some prisoners were admitted with preexisting terminal illnesses. On August 12, the *News* newspaper reported that two inmates in the National Palace of Corrections in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, died at the Martha Tubman Memorial Hospital. The medical reports revealed that Karlabo Kayee, age 65, was

diagnosed with pneumonia and taken to the hospital on August 3 but died on August 4, while Roland Quannah, age 42, who suffered from a sore throat and loss of appetite, was taken to the hospital on August 1 and died on August 4.

There were media reports of violence. On May 11, the *FrontPage Africa* newspaper reported that a 40-year-old man identified as Joe Kolleh died three days after being taken into custody by the Ganta Police Detachment. Police held the deceased, a resident of the Gbloryee community in Ganta, for allegedly failing to repay a debt to a friend. The deceased's family publicly alleged foul play, but the Liberia National Police did not respond.

The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported there were no major incidents of prison violence or prisoner-on-prisoner violence but said minor skirmishes were common. In January a prisoner attacked another inmate with a sharp object during an altercation. The victim was not badly injured, and the perpetrator was sentenced to additional prison time for the attack.

The Rural Human Rights Activists Programme noted that inadequate access to food was one of the major problems facing the country's prisons. The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation noted that prison authorities granted prisoners access to movement or exercise and the use of toilets; however, human rights monitors said lack of adequate space to meet the physical exercise needs of inmates was a challenge. Some prisons had clinics to provide inmates with health care; those facilities that lacked clinics received visiting clinicians to provide health care. Prisoners with disabilities were treated according to case and need. On August 11, *FrontPage Africa* alleged inmates were suffering from hunger at the Gbarnga Central Prison, quoting prisoners decrying the quality of and access to food and sanitation supplies. In response, the Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation and prison officials refuted some of the claims but acknowledged it was investigating others.

Administration: An investigative board at Monrovia Central Prison reviewed reports of prisoner officials' misconduct for appropriate administrative action. The bureau stated that a case of misconduct at the Bondiway Central Prison in Margibi County led to the demotion and reassignment of three officials, including the superintendent, for extending improper privileges to an inmate.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted independent monitoring of prison conditions by local human rights groups, international NGOs, the United Nations, diplomatic personnel, and media throughout the year, including both scheduled and ad hoc visits. Some human rights groups, including domestic and international organizations, visited detainees at police headquarters and prisoners in the Monrovia Central Prison. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights and Prison Fellowship Liberia had unfettered access to facilities. According to the Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Liberian New Hope Foundation Center, Serving Humanity for Empowerment and Development, Finn Church Aid, Serving Humanity for Development, UN Development Program (UNDP), and Rural Human Rights Activists Programme also visited prisons during the year.

Improvements: The Bureau of Corrections and Rehabilitation, with the assistance of businessman Upjit “Jeety” Singh Sachdeva, undertook the renovation of the Monrovia Central Prison, which included the installation of 2,500-liter poly tanks for water storage along with a generator for the supply of water during a power outage. The Ministry of Finance increased the prison budget for prison operations, resulting in an improvement in the food for inmates. The government, in partnership with UNDP, conducted training for 64 new correctional officers in Grand Bassa, Grand Cape Mount, and Margibi Counties on using probation. The NGO Serving Humanity for Empowerment and Development, with support from the European Union, provided COVID-19 vaccinations to prisons in Bong, Margibi, and Nimba Counties.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these prohibitions and rights. At the opening of the August Term of Court on August 9, Resident Judge of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court of Gbarpolu County Zuballah Kizeku, cautioned law enforcement officers to adhere to the due process of law when arresting individuals or groups alleged to have committed crimes. Judge Kizeku explained that “law enforcers discriminate against their arrest and the criminal justice process by going after cases that are about money.” The judge noted that the increasing wave of

wrongful arrests by law enforcers was responsible for overcrowded conditions in prisons around the country.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In general police must have warrants issued by a magistrate to make arrests. The law allows for arrests without a warrant if the necessary paperwork is filed immediately afterwards for review by the appropriate authority. Nonetheless, arrests often were made without judicial authorization, and warrants were sometimes issued without sufficient evidence.

The law provides that authorities either charge or release detainees within 48 hours. Detainees generally were informed of the charges against them upon arrest but not always brought before a judge for arraignment within 48 hours.

At the opening of the February Term of Court in Sanniquellie on February 8, Judge Kontoe, who presided over the Eighth Judicial Circuit Court, emphasized the need for magistrates not to take bond fees. Public defender Tairlo Wehyee responded that the overcrowding of court dockets, as well as the prisons, was due to bond fees imposed by magistrates. He noted accused individuals who could not afford to pay these fees were jailed and sometimes remained in lengthy pretrial detention. Additionally, some magistrates solicited money from plaintiffs or complainants to transport the accused or convicted to prison. The Office of Public Defense continued to face logistical constraints that hindered visits to hard-to-reach magisterial courts in the country. Magistrates in remote areas often adjudicated all cases, including land, marriage, and rape cases, which deprived the accused of an adequate defense.

According to the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, a detainee's access to a hearing before a judge sometimes depended on whether there was a functioning court or available transportation in the area. Those arraigned were often held in lengthy pretrial detention.

The law also provides that, once detained, a criminal defendant must be indicted during the next succeeding term of court after arrest or, if the indicted defendant is not tried within the next succeeding court term and no cause is given, the case against the defendant is to be dismissed; nevertheless, cases were rarely dismissed

on either ground. Approximately 30 percent of pretrial detainees nationwide had been incarcerated for more than two terms of court without a hearing.

Criminal Courts A, B, C, and D had one assigned public defender each, while two were assigned to the Criminal Court E in the First Judicial Circuit at the Temple of Justice in Monrovia. Due to lack of sufficient government support, only five public defenders were assigned to the 10 magisterial courts in Montserrado County. There was a public defender's office at the Monrovia Central Prison as well as the Coordinator of the Judiciary Public Defense Program overseeing the Supreme Court and Juvenile Court, bringing the total number of public defenders in Montserrado County to 13.

Two public defenders were assigned for each of the other 14 counties. Under the National Public Defender Program, each police station is required to maintain an Office of Court Liaison that works with the Public Defender's Office in each county. According to the national coordinator of the program, the 40 public defenders, down by one from 41 in 2020 due to the death of a public defender who was not replaced, were insufficient to provide adequate access to justice for indigent persons across the country. Magistrates or police officers are responsible for contacting the public defender in cases where individuals are arrested on a warrant. In the instances when a warrantless arrest is made, the Court Liaison Officer in each police station is responsible for contacting the public defender. The coordinator for public defense noted that in some cases, the families of the defendants also contacted the assigned public defenders. Public defenders may also take on civil cases, after a review by the coordinator for public defense, provided that the defendant is indigent and no financial rewards or compensation are paid to the public defender.

According to the Independent National Commission on Human Rights and newspaper accounts, some jurisdictions occasionally lacked both a prosecutor and a public defender, and the magistrate judge proceeded without them. Although not contrary to law, depending on the type and scope of the case, it was not considered a best practice. The law provides for bail for all noncapital or non-drug-related criminal offenses; it severely limits bail for individuals charged with capital offenses or serious sexual crimes. Bail may be paid in cash, property, or insurance, or be granted on personal recognizance. The bail system was inefficient and

susceptible to corruption. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights and other civil rights observers reported that judges misused the bail system, viewing it as punitive rather than a way to regulate appearance in court. Some judges used the possibility of bail to solicit bribes.

According to human rights attorney Findley Karnga, the law is clear in its provisions on the use of the bail system. Karnga noted, however, that some judges used their discretionary powers to make it difficult for accused persons to get bail set. Karnga said that he experienced this on behalf of clients on numerous occasions, which led to them being held behind bars for extended periods of time as a form of pretrial punishment.

Detainees have the right to prompt access to counsel, visits from family members, and, if indigent, an attorney provided by the state in criminal cases. Public defender's offices remained understaffed, and some allegedly charged indigent clients for their services. The Liberia National Bar Association reported logistical support frequently was not provided to public defenders.

Although official policy allows detained suspects to communicate with others, including a lawyer or family member, inadequate provision of telephone services resulted in many inmates being unable to communicate with anyone outside of the detention facility. With funding from the European Union's European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights program, the Rural Human Rights Activists Programme and Serving Humanity for Empowerment and Development continued to provide cell phone services to prisoners in Bong, Margibi, and Nimba Counties.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports in the press that security forces and police made some arbitrary arrests.

Some political parties accused the Liberia National Police of arresting opposition politicians on trumped-up charges. For example, Mo Ali, the secretary general of the opposition Unity Party, was arrested on March 25 on charges of "terroristic threat against the state" for allegedly making inflammatory remarks on video and Facebook that incited petrol bomb attacks against the National Election Commission and Supreme Court Justice Joseph N. Nagbe. Minister of Justice Frank Musah Dean ordered police to release Ali until authorities presented

evidence supporting the charges. Ali was released on March 26.

On October 1, the political opposition party Alternative National Congress accused police of political intimidation following the arrest of party member Jethro Saylah Kangar Harris in Ganta, Nimba County, while the party was providing support to an opposition candidate in a congressional by-election. The party called on police to protect persons' lives and property rather than harass and violate their rights and civil liberties. Harris was accused of intentionally spreading false and inflammatory information by posting photographs of a corpse that he alleged was the victim of ritualistic violence. He knowingly published pictures of the autopsy of someone he knew and claimed it was proof of active organ harvesting from living persons for use in witchcraft. He later admitted to his actions and false accusation, and on October 4, the Monrovia City Court remanded Harris to the Monrovia Central Prison.

On July 22, Criminal Court E Judge Blamo Dixon ordered Justice Minister Dean, Liberia National Police Inspector General Colonel Patrick Toe Sudue, and Monrovia City Mayor Jefferson Tamba Koijee to release detainees and desist from detaining peaceful citizens. The judge's order came because of a petition for a writ of habeas corpus filed by Attorney Alphonsus Woiwor on the same day asking the judge to order Koijee to produce Rose Wreh, Felecia Wreh, and Christiane Toe. The four-count document declared the women were arrested on July 19 and transported to Zone One, Bushrod Island, and thereafter taken to Liberia National Police Headquarters on July 20. From there they were later taken to the Monrovia City Hall without charge. Neither the Liberia National Police nor the mayor of Monrovia informed the detainees why they were arrested. According to press reports, upon the failure of the government's attorney to appear in court to justify the arrests, the court ordered the release of the women through a default judgment.

Pretrial Detention: Although the law provides for a defendant to receive an expeditious trial, lengthy pretrial and prearrestment detention remained serious problems. As of October pretrial detainees accounted for approximately 63 percent of the prison population across the country and 83 percent in the Monrovia Central Prison. In some cases the length of pretrial detention exceeded the maximum length of sentence that could be imposed for the alleged crime.

The use of detention as a punitive measure, failure to issue indictments in a timely manner, lack of a functioning bail system, poor court recordkeeping, missing files, failure of judges to assign court dates, failure of defense counsel to file motions to dismiss, and a lack of resources for public defenders all contributed to prolonged pretrial detention. The suspension of jury trials due to COVID-19 restrictions meant that some defendants opted to continue detention rather than submit to a bench trial. Conversely, the release of detainees on bail pending trial remained controversial, especially given the backlog in trials.

According to the Rural Human Rights Activist Programme, from January to July, 266 pretrial detainees had their cases dismissed and were released under the Magistrate Sitting Program in Bong, Margibi, and Nimba Counties. The Office of Public Defense noted, however, that logistical difficulties continued to constrain the program, making exact figures on the release of prisoners difficult to determine.

The corrections system continued to develop its capacity to implement probation. During the year there were no new probation officers hired, however, thus limiting probation services to eight of the country's 15 counties.

With UNICEF's support, and in coordination with the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, the Child Justice Section of the Ministry of Justice worked to remove children from the criminal justice system. As of December 31, 121 children were removed from detention. In addition another 588 cases, consisting of 473 boys and 115 girls, were mediated under the Juvenile Diversion Program, in which police used its discretion to arrest when parents committed to taking responsibility for any damage resulting from misdemeanor acts by minors, in order to avoid their detention altogether.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court:

Persons arrested or detained, regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds, are entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and to request prompt release, although this was not always the case in practice.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and laws provide for an independent judiciary, but judges and magistrates were subject to influence and engaged in corruption. Judges sometimes solicited bribes to try cases, grant bail to detainees, award damages in civil cases, or acquit defendants in criminal cases. Defense attorneys and prosecutors sometimes suggested defendants pay bribes to secure favorable decisions from judges, prosecutors, and jurors or to have court staff place cases on the docket for trial.

Some judicial officials and prosecutors appeared subject to pressure, and the outcome of some trials appeared to be predetermined, especially when the accused persons were politically connected or socially prominent. Media outlets often accused Solicitor General Sayma Syrennius Cephus of exerting direct influence over, and having inappropriate contact with, judges as well as defendants involved in his cases, and provided credible evidence in support of those accusations. The government and its integrity institutions, such as the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission, took no known action in response to these allegations.

Judge Roland Dahn of the Eighth Judicial Circuit Court in Nimba County and Magistrate Victoria Duncan of the Kakata Magisterial Court in Margibi County both admitted to ex parte call exchanges between them and Senate Secretary Nanborlor Singbeh while handling separate criminal cases of alleged corruption in the maritime industry against Singbeh (see section 4) and several other defendants, including Chapman Logan, chief executive officer of Logan & Logan Group, a company in the maritime industry. A foreign investor, Hans Armstrong, who was also under investigation for alleged corrupt practices in the maritime industry, filed a complaint before the Judicial Inquiry Commission – an auxiliary commission established within the judiciary with the exclusive power and authority to receive and investigate complaints against judges of courts of record and nonrecord for violation of any provision of the Judicial Canons – that Senate Secretary Nanborlor Singbeh was receiving preferential treatment (the ex parte communications, which are generally not allowed) from Judge Dahn and Magistrate Duncan because of his political position. Armstrong’s complaint reportedly prompted Chief Justice Korkpor to communicate to the Judicial Inquiry Commission through its chairperson, Associate Justice Yussif Kaba, to conduct an investigation of the two

judges, which continued at year's end.

Separately, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Francis Korkpor in statements, including his special statement at the opening of the May Term of Criminal Courts at the Temple of Justice, decried the involvement of judges in bribery and cautioned them to desist from the practice because it tarnished the image of the judiciary.

The government and NGOs continued efforts to harmonize the formal and traditional customary justice systems, particularly through campaigns to encourage trial of criminal cases in formal courts. Traditional leaders were encouraged to defer to police investigators and prosecutors in cases involving murder, rape, and human trafficking, as well as some civil cases that could be resolved in either formal or traditional systems.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial, but judges and magistrates were subject to influence. By law defendants may opt for a jury trial or a trial by judge (a bench trial). Since jury trials did not resume until November 8 due to a COVID-19 moratorium on in-person jury trials, many defendants opted to remain in detention or on bail to avoid a bench trial, which accused persons often considered to be less advantageous to them. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials and consult with an attorney (or be provided one at public expense) in a timely manner. Defendants have the right to be informed of charges promptly and in detail. If a defendant, complainant, or witness does not speak or understand English, the court is to provide an interpreter for the trial. The justice system, however, did not provide interpreters throughout the legal process. For example, there were no sign language interpreters or other accommodations provided for deaf persons, and rarely was interpretation available unless paid for by the defendant.

Defendants also have the right to a trial without delay and to have adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense, although these rights often were not observed. Defendants are generally presumed innocent under the law, and they have the right to confront and question prosecution or plaintiff witnesses, present

their own evidence and witnesses, and appeal adverse decisions. These rights were often not observed and were rarely enforced.

Some local NGOs continued to provide legal services to indigent defendants and others who had no representation. The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia continued to provide legal services to indigent defendants, but due to the lack of funding, emphasized resolving cases through mediation instead of going to trial. The Liberia National Bar Association also continued to provide pro bono legal services – such as seeking the release of hundreds of pretrial detainees, mediating out-of-court settlements, and in some instances litigating cases – to indigent defendants, but only in the counties of Grand Bassa, Margibi, and Montserrado after shutting down the legal clinics in Bomi and Bong Counties.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The constitution stipulates the creation of a claims court, but it had not occurred by year's end. There was no specialized court to address lawsuits seeking damages for human rights violations. Individuals or organizations may seek remedies for human rights violations through domestic courts or through administrative mechanisms. Human rights violations are generally reported to the Independent National Commission of Human Rights, which then refers cases to relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Justice. In some cases individuals and organizations may appeal adverse domestic decisions to regional human rights bodies after all domestic redress options have been exhausted. While there is an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice to address human rights violations in member states, few citizens were aware of it or could afford to access this court.

On June 4, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice in Abuja, Nigeria, reaffirmed its November 2020 ruling in favor of former associate justice of the Supreme Court of Liberia Kabina Mohamed Ja'neh. The court ruled that the government wrongfully impeached Ja'neh, dismissing the government's challenge that the ruling in favor of Ja'neh violated the government's sovereignty. At year's

end the government had not implemented the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice's ruling against it.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected these rights, although with some unofficial limits.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals could generally criticize the government publicly or privately, but government officials used civil libel and slander laws to place limits on freedom of expression, and self-censorship was widespread. Some media outlets avoided criticizing government officials due to fears of legal sanction and potential loss of government advertising, which, according to the Press Union of Liberia, was the largest source of media revenue. Other outlets avoided addressing sensitive human rights issues such as female genital mutilation/cutting. Court decisions against journalists sometimes involved exorbitant fines.

In a May 10 interview following the opening of the May Term of Court, Solicitor General Sayma Syrennius Cephus issued a warning against persons who make reckless statements in the name of free speech. Solicitor General Cephus stated that he would issue an arrest order for those who abuse free speech. He made the statement following a threat by Mike Jabateh, an influential leader of youths of the Mandingo ethnic group, who threatened to kill Chief Justice Francis Korkpor and accused him of taking sides in a land dispute between the Mandingo ethnic group and the Mano and Gio ethnic groups in Ganta, Nimba County.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including

Online Media: Independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views. According to the Press Union of Liberia, civil suits, or the threats thereof, relating to libel, slander, and defamation were sometimes used to curtail freedom of expression and intimidate the press. The Press Union of Liberia also expressed concern that media outlets owned directly by politicians and government officials were crowding out privately owned media and advocated for legislation to prohibit ownership of media by public officials.

Violence and Harassment: Press associations reported that government officials occasionally harassed newspaper and radio station owners, as well as individual journalists, because of their political opinions and reporting.

On June 25, officers of the Liberia National Police allegedly assaulted journalists Molley Trojan Kiazolu of Farbric Radio FM101.1 and Hannah Geterminah of the *Liberian Observer* newspaper. While on assignment, broadcast journalist Kiazolu was allegedly assaulted by police officers who confiscated Kiazolu's cell phone as he was recording a video of a separate incident in which a police officer prevented an individual from taking a photograph in public space. A police officer then allegedly assaulted, insulted, and tore the clothes of Geterminah as she tried to intervene on behalf of Kiazolu.

On August 2, *FrontPage Africa* reported that the Press Union of Liberia condemned the arrest of journalist Nyantee Togba of OK FM by Liberia National Police, allegedly on orders from Montserrado County Electoral District #17 Representative Hanson Kiazolu. On July 30, the Liberia National Police arrested Togba while he was doing live coverage of a demonstration at the home of Representative Hanson Kiazolu after the protesters blocked the main entrance to the representative's house in Brewerville Township, outside Monrovia. According to the Press Union of Liberia, Togba's arrest was an attempt to censor the journalist. Police released Togba the same day.

On January 28, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that in the days leading up to and following senatorial elections in December 2020, private security forces and civilians attacked, harassed, and threatened members of the press. In Barclayville, Grand Kru County, a group attacked and stole the phones and voice recorders of Christopher Kumeh, a news director with the privately owned Voice

of Grand Kru radio station, and Emmanuel Koffa, a program director with the privately owned Ahteenah Radio station, while they were filming those fighting over election results at a vote collation center in the town. The journalists said a group of approximately 50 persons beat Kumeh for more than 10 minutes until police intervened. The journalists said the mob also stole their phones and voice recorders. On January 19, Kumeh told the Committee to Protect Journalists that his phone and voice recorder were not returned and that he suffered severe pains to his neck, head, and feet following the attack. On January 20, Liberia National Police spokesperson Moses Carter told the Committee to Protect Journalists that he was aware of the attacks on Kumeh and Koffa and said that police would prosecute those responsible.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Although generally able to express a wide variety of views, some journalists practiced self-censorship to avoid harassment. Journalists and media directors also practiced self-censorship to maintain advertising revenue from the government, the largest advertiser in the country. There were several reports that politicians and government agencies offered “transportation fees” to journalists to secure coverage of events. Some media outlets, journalists, and broadcasters charged fees to publish articles or host radio programs.

On January 19, the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism imposed a media blackout on popular talk show host Henry Pedro Costa and threatened to shut down Radio D-15 after Costa announced his return to the local airways via the Logan Town-based radio station, although he was broadcasting from outside the country. In 2019 the government shut down Costa’s Roots FM radio station for operating without a license, although according to court records, Costa submitted his application for a broadcast license, but its issuance was delayed indefinitely. In a January 17 press release, Information Minister Ledgerhood Julius Rennie warned media houses, in particular radio stations, against using their platforms for the broadcast of the *Henry Costa Show*, which he claimed was usually critical of the government, and noted Costa “fled the country in 2020, after a writ was issued for his arrest in a criminal matter. Costa is still wanted by the law.” The government informed the station’s management that Costa, as a “fugitive from justice,” could not host radio programs meant to

communicate to the local audience while he was abroad. The press release signed by Information Minister Ledgerhood Rennie, was quoted as saying that “any act contrary to said notice will be a violation of the terms of the permit issued by the Ministry of Information and licensing conditions promulgated under the Telecommunications Act of Liberia.” The *Henry Costa Show* continued to broadcast on Roots 102.7 FM via Facebook Live and stream on Roots FM on SoundCloud.

Libel/Slander Laws: Criminal libel and slander laws were repealed in 2019; nonetheless, government officials occasionally used the threat of civil suits to intimidate critics.

On March 2, National Port Authority Managing Director Bill Twehway spoke to journalists about his lawsuit against talk show host and political commentator Henry Costa, saying Costa’s allegation linking the managing director to the deaths of several auditors had caused threats to his family. Costa had accused Twehway of being complicit in the death of Internal Audit Agency Director General Emmanuel Barten Nyeswua and three auditors working for the Liberia Revenue Authority. Twehway dismissed the notion that his lawsuit was intended to silence critical voices against his public service record, stressing that the court was the best place to establish truth from defamation.

In April the Nathaniel Fallo McGill Humanitarian Foundation threatened a lawsuit against Bacchus Menipakei Carr for what the organization called “false allegation of a plot by Nathaniel McGill, minister of state for presidential affairs, to assassinate him.” The foundation issued a notice of litigation at the civil law court if Carr did not retract the allegations. Carr explained that he did not retract the allegations because he used social media platforms to elevate human rights abuses and other governance failures perpetrated by the government.

The Press Union of Liberia continued efforts to self-regulate media and ensure adherence to standards, including investigation and settlement of complaints against or by the press. The union’s National Media Council, launched in 2017 to address court cases against media, continued to mediate cases throughout the year.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

There were reports of government officials threatening legal action and filing civil lawsuits in attempts to censor protected internet-based speech and intimidate content creators (see Censorship or Content Restrictions).

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

A variety of civil society groups conducted demonstrations throughout the year, including outside the legislature and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Liberia National Bar Association and the Independent National Commission on Human Rights stated that the constitution and law only require prior notification, not application for a permit, to allow the government time to provide sufficient security to protect free assembly, and that a permitting process could restrict freedom of assembly. Many observers said the relevant laws and regulations required clarification.

On August 2, according to published reports, Liberia National Police injured several students protesting at the University of Liberia. According to an eyewitness, officers in the Liberia National Police reportedly fired tear gas, and in an uncorroborated report, rubber bullets – which the Liberia National Police Inspector General Patrick T. Sudue stated police did not have – at students protesting for the resumption of regular in-person classes instead of an online learning program established in response to COVID-19 at the state-run university. The Liberia National Police and university leadership claimed that tear gas had

only been employed when students attempted to damage police and university property and break through police barriers. At a subsequent student protest on September 20 demanding that instructors return to classes, police fired tear gas on the students to disperse them and reportedly arrested some of them.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

On June 18, the government announced new COVID-19 measures to prevent a surge in infections. Passengers traveling from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were denied entry into the country. The government also limited gatherings, including weddings and funerals, to no more than 20 persons and warned that “the government may be compelled to impose a lockdown and or curfew if the guidelines were not fully complied with.”

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees.

The law forbids the forced return of refugees, their families, or other persons who may be subjected to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political

opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and the government generally respected those rights for refugees. The government provided a prima facie mode of recognition for Ivorian refugees, meaning Ivorian refugees who arrived in Liberia because of the 2011 postelection violence in Cote d'Ivoire did not have to appear before an asylum committee to gain refugee status; the status was granted automatically. UNHCR noted there was a significant number of new arrivals, mostly Ivorian refugees, in January and February and reported that, as of October 31, Liberia was host to 34,389 refugees from Cote d'Ivoire and 193 asylum seekers from other countries.

Durable Solutions: During the year the government resettled, offered naturalization, and assisted in the voluntary return of refugees. Voluntary repatriation of Ivorian refugees from Cote d'Ivoire's 2011 postelection violence continued. According to UNHCR, as of October, 4,905 Ivorian refugees had returned to their country. UNHCR and the Liberia Refugee Repatriation Resettlement Commission reported providing continuing support to refugees who opted for local integration.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. Asylum seekers who presented themselves to UNHCR and the Liberia Refugee Repatriation Resettlement Commission were provided temporary protection while their cases were being adjudicated. The government, along with UNHCR and other implementing partners, continued to provide protection to Ivorian refugees. According to UNHCR, as of October, 34,389 refugees from Cote d'Ivoire and 193 refugees from other countries remained in Liberia.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: On November 16, House of Representatives by-elections were

held in Bong, Bomi, Grand Gedeh, and Nimba counties to replace incumbents who were elected to the Senate during the December 2020 midterm elections.

International and domestic observers noted that the by-elections were largely peaceful, although there were some reported instances of vote tampering, intimidation, and harassment of the only female candidate in Electoral District #1, Nimba County by-election, Abigail Laikarnue Kou Freeman, and election violence during the campaign period ahead of election day.

The country last held presidential elections in October 2017. A runoff presidential election was scheduled for November 2017, but it was delayed due to a legal challenge to the October results. The Supreme Court ruled in a 4-1 decision in December 2017 that there was insufficient evidence presented by the appellant political parties (the Unity Party and the Liberty Party) to justify a rerun, which quelled rising tensions around the country. The court ordered the National Elections Commission to schedule the runoff that month in accordance with the constitution. The then Montserrado County Senator George Weah of the Congress for Democratic Change party, which formed a coalition with the National Patriotic Party and the Liberia People's Democratic Party to become known as the Coalition for Democratic Change, won the presidential runoff on December 26, 2017, in an election that was generally considered free and fair.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were instances of political violence against opposition leaders and candidates. After the December 2020 midterm senatorial elections, partisan clashes occurred at the headquarters of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change.

On March 29, Solicitor General Sayma Syrennius Cephus filed a petition asking the Supreme Court for a writ of prohibition against the seating of Brownie Samukai, an opposition senator-elect chosen by Lofa County in the December 2020 elections. The two main arguments of the writ were that Samukai's earlier conviction of misappropriation of Armed Forces of Liberia pension funds could disqualify him from public service under the law, and that even though Samukai had raised his portion of the restitution ordered by the court, he could not be deemed to have been cleared until the other two defendants convicted with him also paid their portion of the restitution, since they were jointly indicted. Contacts and media reports, however, noted that neither the solicitor general nor the

Supreme Court was pursuing payment from the two other defendants. The legal limbo created by the solicitor general's writ prevented Samukai from serving for the entirety of the legislative session during the year, leading to public protests in Lofa County and claims that the solicitor general's actions were mainly designed to prevent an opposition senator from being seated.

Following the 2017 presidential election, appointments in the government were created for members and sympathizers of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change as a reward for, or benefit of, party affiliation rather than based on qualification or experience. The appointments were made outside the standard hiring process of the Civil Service Agency. Some technicians and other persons who had tenured positions under the previous administration were initially harassed.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No law limits participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Some observers believed traditional and cultural factors, as well as financial limitations, limited women's participation in politics, as compared with the participation of men. During the campaign period, traditional leaders in some rural areas at times deployed the "country devil" to harass them and their supporters, disrupting campaign activities. Women participated at significantly lower levels than men as party leaders and elected officials.

Ahead of the November 16 by-elections, only two female candidates competed in a field of 33. Independent candidate Abigail Laikarnue Kou Freeman lost the race for the Nimba District #1 seat, while independent candidate Finda Gborie Lansanah won the contest for Bomi County District #1 representative.

In a November 16 statement, a local elections observation group, Liberia Elections Observation Network, noted it had observed significant underrepresentation of women in the temporary staff of the National Elections Commission for the November 16 representative by-elections in Bong, Bomi, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh Counties, where there were 275 women in a polling staff of 660.

Election law requires that political parties "endeavor to ensure 30 percent" female participation. In the December 2020 senatorial midterm election, 20 of the 118

candidates were women, constituting 17 percent of the candidates, all from opposition parties and none from the ruling party. The main opposition block, the Collaborating Political Parties, met the threshold with five female candidates out of 15. The ruling Coalition for Democratic Change fielded no female candidates for any Senate seat.

Some women supporting female Gbotoe Kanneh, candidate in the senatorial midterm election in Gbarpolu County, were harassed, and in some instances beaten, by supporters of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change candidate Alfred G. Koiwood, a two-term representative in the county.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for bribery, abuse of office, economic sabotage, and other corruption-related offenses committed by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year. Officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.

Corruption was a fact of daily life for citizens and businesses alike. According to the September Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia State of Corruption Report, 90 percent of citizens thought corruption was high in the country and 76 percent had witnessed corruption. The report also labeled the national budget as a tool for corruption in which public resources end up in the pockets of public officials through direct payments, indirect payments, or backdoor deals. As noted earlier in Section 1.e., there was also reportedly widespread corruption in the judiciary, in the form of bribery and extortion where favorable decisions were bought or in the form of direct government influence over judicial decisions.

The mandate of the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission is to prevent, investigate, and prosecute cases of corruption among public officials. On June 14, President Weah appointed Edwin Kla Martin as the new executive chairperson of the commission, effective July 22. Martin's appointment followed the resignation of Ndubuisi Nwabudike as chairperson in February amid allegations that Nwabudike

obtained his Liberian citizenship illegally.

Corruption: On September 6, Criminal Court “C” Judge Ousman Feika dismissed a five-million-dollar case of economic sabotage, theft of property, forgery, and criminal conspiracy against Secretary of the Liberian Senate J. Nanborlor F. Singbeh Sr., who allegedly used his position to obtain a government investment incentive package that he used unlawfully to import vehicles and equipment for personal gain, and 12 codefendants. Judge Feika dismissed the case on the grounds that the private coprosecutor for the government, Hans Armstrong, was also indicted for the crimes of theft of property and forgery in the Nimba County Court, including some of the same crimes that were part of the indictment against Singbeh and his codefendants. On August 9, Assistant Minister for Litigation at the Ministry of Justice Wesseh Alphonsus Wesseh requested that Senate President Pro Tempore Albert Tugbe Chie relieve Singbeh of his duty on grounds that he was criminally indicted. The Senate did not grant the request.

On July 16, the manager of the Port of Buchanan, Charles MacArthur D. Gull, and his chief statistician, Amara Kamara, were suspended for alleged financial impropriety amounting to more than \$200,000. The two officials were allegedly involved in diverting monies intended for the government into their personal accounts both in the country and abroad. The funds, according to reports, were remittances paid by ArcelorMittal and Equatorial Palm Oil for the exportation of iron ore and palm oil through Buchanan, a seaport in Grand Bassa County. Agents of the National Security Agency reportedly arrested the men. In a press release, the port authority confirmed the pair were suspended without pay for alleged financial impropriety. Following interrogation by the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission and the National Security Agency, Gull and Kamara conceded to diverting port funds. Following that interrogation, Gull fled the country and subsequently provided substantial documentation, which was published by local media, that appeared to demonstrate the managing director of the National Port Authority, Bill Twehway, and other officials had colluded to illicitly award the loading contract for the port to a company they secretly co-owned via family members, Creative Developer Incorporated. Gull claimed he had confessed in order to avoid physical harm and said his arrest was meant to make him a scapegoat for diversion of port funds by Twehway.

On August 30, the anticorruption commission and other officials announced that its vice chairperson Kanio Bai Gbala was under investigation for his alleged involvement as a beneficial co-owner of Creative Developer Incorporated.

On August 23, President Weah suspended Presidential Special Projects Coordinator Makenneh L. Keita for allegedly soliciting five million dollars from a businessman who was exploring investment opportunities. Keita was asked to report to the office of the Legal Advisor to the President for investigation. At year's end the outcome of the investigation by the Office of the Legal Advisor was not made publicly known.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The government had not implemented most of the recommendations contained in the 2009 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report. The law creating the commission requires that the president submit quarterly progress reports to the legislature on the implementation of TRC recommendations; however, President Weah had not done so since taking office in 2018. Instead, he submitted a written request to the Senate in 2019 asking for advice on how his administration should proceed in addressing the TRC recommendations. Among the TRC's key recommendations was the establishment of a war and economic crimes court, for which there was significant support in the country. In 2019 Speaker of the House Bhofal Chambers prevented a prowar crimes court resolution, signed by two-thirds of the members of the House of Representatives, from proceeding. The speaker defended his actions, saying that the establishment of the court was a contentious issue that required more consultations by members with their constituents.

In June and July the Senate deliberated an alternative proposal that would

recommend the president establish a Transitional Justice Commission. That proposal recommended that the Transitional Justice Commission would, among other proposed activities, evaluate, rather than implement, the TRC recommendations. On August 19, the plenary of the House of Representatives voted in favor of a motion to allow House members to go back to their respective electoral districts to consult with their constituents before deciding on the establishment of a war crimes court.

The Independent National Commission on Human Rights has a mandate to promote and protect human rights; investigate and conduct hearings on human rights violations; propose changes to laws, policies, and administrative practices and regulations; and counsel the government on the implementation of national and international human rights standards. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights, however, publicly claimed it was poorly supported by the government and thus largely unable to fulfill its mandate.

On June 14, President Weah reconstituted the Board of Commissioners of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, naming human rights lawyer T. Dempster Brown as chairman.

The Human Rights Protection Unit of the Ministry of Justice convened coordination meetings that provided a forum for domestic and international human rights NGOs to present matters to the government, but the unit similarly complained about lack of support.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape of a woman or man is illegal, but the government did not enforce the law effectively, and rape remained a serious and pervasive problem, especially under COVID-19 enforced lockdowns. The law's definition of rape does not specifically criminalize spousal rape. Conviction of first-degree rape, defined as rape involving a minor, rape that results in serious injury or disability, or rape committed with the use of a deadly weapon, is punishable by up to life imprisonment. Conviction of second-degree rape, defined

as rape committed without the aggravating circumstances enumerated above, is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

In September 2020 President Weah issued a proclamation declaring a national emergency on rape after a three-day protest by thousands following the rape of a three-year-old girl by a teenage boy using a razor blade to commit the crime. Under the National Rape Emergency, President Weah declared initial measures that included the appointment of a special prosecutor for rape, the setting up of a National Sex Offender Registry, the establishment of a National Security Taskforce on sexual- and gender-based violence, and the allotment of an initial amount of two million dollars to strengthen the country's efforts to combat rape and sexual- and gender-based violence. There was, however, little follow-through on these initial proposals and efforts.

On April 12, *FrontPage Africa* reported that a 49-year-old man from Zota District in Bong County fled after he reportedly raped and impregnated his 14-year-old daughter. The alleged sexual abuse took place from December 2020 to April. It was reported that after sexually abusing her and in a bid to buy her silence, he threatened to kill her if she reported the assaults to anyone. After being discovered, the alleged rapist threatened both the girl and her mother with death if they reported him to police. His whereabouts were unknown at year's end.

On June 8, a radio station reported that a 65-year-old man was arrested in Margibi County for allegedly raping a one-month-old baby, leading to the baby's death. Women in the county campaigned for the death penalty for rapists following the incident.

On August 20, the Liberia National Police arrested and detained the founder and general overseer of Image of Christ Deliverance Philadelphia Central Church in Kakata, Margibi County, Apostle D. Franklin Snorton, for allegedly raping a 21-year-old pregnant woman. According to the victim's father, his daughter alleged that Snorton demanded sex from her while pointing a knife and threatening to kill her if she resisted him. The alleged perpetrator was arraigned before the Kakata Magisterial Court on August 23.

On December 30, *FrontPage Africa* reported that a 14-year-old girl in Gbarpolu

County died as a result of being raped by a 30-year-old man identified as Saah Sumo on December 22. The victim was first transported to the Mona Clinic, but it lacked the medical supplies to stop the bleeding caused by the assault. She was referred to the Chief Jallah Lone Health Center in Bopolu City, which was several hours away from Kolah Village where she resided. The only one-stop center for rape and other gender-based violence cases and medical center in the area was located in Bopolu, Gbarpolu county's capital. The local police station was understaffed and lacked the resources to follow up on cases like rape that often occurred in the rural parts of the county.

Minister of Gender, Children, and Social Protection Williametta Piso Saydee-Tarr claimed on a national radio program that sexual and gender-based violence cases decreased between January and June. Women's rights groups criticized the ministry, noting that the government's data showed no decrease. Between January and June the Ministry of Justice's Sexual and Gender-based Violence Unit reported 605 cases, comprising 450 statutory rape cases, 100 rape cases, 55 gang-rape cases, and 10 cases of sodomy.

According to the Independent National Commission on Human Rights' August *Human Rights Situation Report*, of the 1,337 inmates at the Monrovia Central Prison, 325 were serving sentences for rape, six for rape and murder, six for rape involving sodomy, and seven for armed robbery and rape. The report noted perpetrators of rape enjoyed widespread impunity, for which it cited bureaucratic obstacles that restricted the number of cases that could be heard in each judicial term and institutional weaknesses by specialized agencies of government tasked with implementing anti-sexual- and gender-based violence policies. The Independent National Commission on Human Rights noted that some perpetrators used COVID-19 restrictions on movement as an opportunity to prey on vulnerable individuals.

An overtaxed justice system, compounded by health restrictions, prevented timely prosecutions, and delays caused many victims to cease cooperating with prosecutors. Victims' families sometimes requested money from the perpetrators as a form of redress; perpetrators sometimes offered money to prevent matters from going to court. Authorities often dropped cases due to a lack of evidence.

Although outlawed, domestic violence remained a widespread problem, and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection stated that in 2020, the most recent figures available, 16 percent of reported sexual- and gender-based violence cases were for domestic violence.

The maximum penalty for conviction of domestic violence was six months' imprisonment, but the government did not enforce the law effectively. The Women and Children Protection Section of the Liberia National Police received reports on cases of domestic violence. Civil society officials suggested that lack of speedy trials led victims to seek redress outside the formal justice system.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): According to the 2019-20 *Liberia Demographic and Health Survey* (LDHS), the most recent available, 38 percent of girls and women ages 15 to 49 had undergone FGM/C, with higher prevalence in the country's northern regions. Although the government routinely decried FGM/C in discussions of violence against women, there were no laws criminalizing it. Political resistance to passing legislation criminalizing FGM/C continued because of the public sensitivity of the topic and its association with particular tribes and secret societies in populous counties. The Sande (for females) and Poro (for males) societies, often referred to as "secret societies," combined traditional religious and cultural practices and engaged in FGM/C as part of their indoctrination ceremonies.

In 2018 then president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf issued an executive order to prohibit FGM/C of all persons younger than age 18 and of persons older than 18 without their consent, but the order lapsed in early 2019 with no extension announced. Several human rights organizations reported bush school (secret society) activities and FGM/C continued, despite the ban. NGO representatives reported there was little political will within the legislature to take on the issue of FGM/C; however, a high-level government official suggested otherwise.

On February 5, the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, Chief Zanzan Karwo, the leader of the National Traditional Council, resisted international pressure to abolish FGM/C. He stated his belief that FGM/C prepares young women to become good wives. An Alternate Economic Livelihood program, initiated in 2019 to provide traditional practitioners of

FGM/C (“zoes”) alternative economic livelihood activities so that they would not generate income from FGM/C, provided resources and education to former practitioners.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: Many observers, including the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, reported an apparent increase in harmful traditional practices during the year, including ritualistic killings, accusations of witchcraft, and trial by ordeal, although comprehensive data to confirm the increase was unavailable. Lot casting, forced ingestion of sassywood (a poisonous concoction made of the bark of the *Erythrophleum suaveolens* tree), and other traditional forms of trial by ordeal to establish guilt or innocence are outlawed. Reported incidents of trial by ordeal included drinking a concocted liquid, heating a metal object until it glowed red and then applying it to the accused’s skin, beatings, inserting sharp objects into bodily orifices (including the vagina), and forcing women to parade naked around the community.

It remained difficult to obtain convictions for ritualistic killings in the court system because the justice system does not recognize traditional rites as judicable issues. There were credible reports by human rights observers, media, and, in one case of a motorcyclist in Maryland County, even the Liberia National Police, of killings in which perpetrators removed body parts from the victims. There were also multiple cases of life-threatening violence against persons accused of witchcraft.

In July a middle-aged man in Sinoe County was subjected to the traditional “sassywood” practice after he was accused of witchcraft in the deaths of two persons, as well the disappearance of a teenager, in a video widely circulated on social media. In the video two men appeared to assault the man. One of the men stepped on the victim’s leg and another stepped on the victim’s neck. The men beat the victim, who was naked, as a crowd looked on. The attackers repeatedly demanded that the victim confess to his alleged crimes.

On March 25, Moses Mlarmah and unidentified others allegedly killed motorcyclist and student Mordecious Nyemah in a ritualistic killing near Bassiken Town, between Gand Kru and Maryland Counties. Nyemah’s killing led to mass protests that resulted in damage to government property, including arson attacks on the home of Speaker of the House of Representatives Bhofal Chambers, the

burning of a police station in the Pleebo Sodoken District, Maryland County, and the escape of 90 inmates from the Harper Central Jail after thousands of protesters vandalized the prison. The violence led President Weah to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew. On April 5, police arrested and sent to the Zwedru Correction Palace several suspects in the killing, many of the escaped prisoners who had been recaptured, as well as some members of the mob who attacked the prison on March 30.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace, but it remained a significant problem at work and in schools. Government billboards and notices in government offices warned against harassment in the workplace. In his remarks at the September 1 induction ceremony for the new Board of Commissioners of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights, Chairman T. Dempster Brown expressed alarm over the increase in the wave of gender-based violence, rape, and sexual harassment across the country and called for swift action to address these issues.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

While most clinics in the country provided family planning counselling and a mix of planning methods, access to these services at times proved difficult, particularly for women living in rural areas or those with limited financial means.

According to the 2019-20 LDHS, the most recent available, 25 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported using a modern form of contraception. Among sexually active unmarried women, 45 percent used modern family planning, while 23 percent of married women used a modern method. Unmet needs for family planning (defined as the percentage of sexually active women who want to postpone their next birth or limit their number of births but did not use a modern method of contraception) increased slightly from 31 percent in 2013 to 33 percent, according to the LDHS. The highest unmet need was among girls and younger women; almost half (47 percent) of women between the ages of 15 and 19 had an unmet need for family planning, primarily for the spacing of children.

The 2019-20 LDHS estimated the maternal mortality rate for the seven-year period

before the survey was 742 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Postpartum hemorrhage remained the leading cause of maternal mortality and accounted for approximately 34 percent of maternal deaths. In remote areas infrastructure and adequate facilities in clinics were often lacking, and midwives and health workers sometimes delivered babies without electricity at night. According to the survey, teenage childbearing was 30 percent in 2019-20. FGM/C remained a problem and contributed to maternal morbidity.

Discrimination: By law women may inherit land and property, are entitled to equal pay for equal work, have the right of equal access to education, and may own and manage businesses. By law men retain legal custody of children in divorce cases. In rural areas traditional practice or traditional leaders often did not recognize a woman's right to inherit land. Programs to educate traditional leaders on women's rights, especially on land rights, made some progress, but authorities often did not enforce those rights in rural areas.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Although the law prohibits ethnic discrimination, racial discrimination is enshrined in the constitution, which restricts citizenship and land ownership to those of "Negro descent." While persons of Lebanese and Asian descent who were born or who had lived most of their lives in the country may not by law attain citizenship or own land, there were some exceptions.

Indigenous Peoples

The law recognizes 16 indigenous ethnic groups; each speaks a distinct primary language and is concentrated regionally. Long-standing disputes regarding land and other resources among ethnic groups continued to contribute to social and political tensions.

Children

Birth Registration: The nationality law stipulates children of "Negro" descent born in the country to at least one Liberian parent are citizens. Children born outside the country to a Liberian father are also Liberian citizens. Nevertheless, they may lose that citizenship if they do not reside in the country prior to age 21, or

if residing abroad they do not take an oath of allegiance before a Liberian consul before age 23. Children born to non-Liberian fathers and Liberian mothers outside of the country do not derive citizenship from the mother. Children born outside of the country to Liberian parents are not entitled to registration, certification, or a birth certificate.

Every child born in the country is entitled to birth registration and certification, regardless of the parents' nationality or socioeconomic status, but if a child born in the country is not of "Negro" descent, the child may not acquire Liberian citizenship. "Non-Negro" residents, such as members of the large Lebanese community, may not acquire or transmit citizenship. The law requires parents to register their infants within 14 days of birth, but according to the 2019-20 LDHS, only 66 per cent of children younger than five years of age were registered.

Education: According to UNESCO, as of 2017, the most recent data available, only 44 percent of children of official primary school age were enrolled in school, and only 55 percent of children completed primary education. Forty percent of primary school students were more than three years older than the age considered to be appropriate for the grade in which they were enrolled. A 2019 international donor assessment indicated approximately 60 percent of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 did not complete sixth grade.

The law provides for tuition-free and compulsory education in public schools from the primary (grades one to six) through junior secondary (grades seven to nine) levels, but many schools charged registration and activity fees to pay for volunteer teachers' salaries and operating costs the government did not fund. The Ministry of Education authorized these fees, which were managed by the school administration and parent teacher associations. These fees prevented some students who could not afford them from attending school, as they were required to be paid before a student could be enrolled.

The academic calendar often conflicted with the preferred timing of traditional instructions (at times referred to as "bush school"). As a result, many children abandoned schools for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months.

Girls accounted for less than half of all students and graduates in primary (44

percent in 2017) and secondary schools (33 percent in 2015), with their proportion decreasing progressively at higher levels (9 percent in tertiary education in 2012).

Sexual harassment of girls in schools was commonplace. Nearly a third of schoolgirls were asked for sex by school staff or other adults in return for money or good scores. Adolescent girls were often denied access to school if they became pregnant.

Nonetheless, the country continued to work on narrowing the gender gap at all levels of education, especially in primary school, where the gender parity index went from 88 girls per 100 boys in 2008 to 95 girls for every 100 boys in school in 2017. Students with disabilities and those in rural counties were most likely to encounter significant barriers to education. Only 14 percent of girls in rural areas completed primary school.

Child Abuse: Child abuse was a widespread and persistent problem, and there were numerous cases reported throughout the year, including of sexual violence against children. The government engaged in public awareness campaigns to combat child rape.

On February 23, *The World News* reported that Mama Cole, the mother of 11-year-old Jerome Brown, who died after reportedly being kept in a shack by his stepmother, Wanneh Tarpalah, and biological father, Emmanuel (no last name given) without eating or drinking for several weeks, called on the government and women and child rights advocates to ensure that those who allegedly starved her son were held accountable.

On August 10, it was reported that the Armed Forces of Liberia released reports from the Ministry of Justice on an investigation initiated by the Ministry of Defense and carried out by the Ministry of Justice through the Liberia National Police exonerated Armed Forces of Liberia Lieutenant Colonel E. Nyankun Williams following a complaint on April 26 by Sergeant Obento Roberts against Williams for raping his 16-year-old daughter. The lieutenant colonel was exonerated because statements recorded from witnesses during the enquiry lacked corroboration.

On November 5, *FrontPage Africa* reported that Siah Tamba, of Komdeh

community, Tubmanburg, Bomi County, admitted to burning the fingers of her adolescent son for stealing meat from his grandmother. She melted plastic on his hands, causing him to lose his left fingers.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The 2011 National Children’s Act sets the minimum marriage age for all persons at 18, the Domestic Relations Law sets the minimum marriage age at 21 for men and 18 for women, and the Equal Rights of Customary Marriage Law of 1998 permits a girl to marry at age 16. According to UNICEF, in 2020, the most recent data available, 9 percent of girls were forced to marry before age 15 and 36 percent before age 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and authorities generally enforced the law, although girls continued to be exploited, including in commercial sex in exchange for money, food, and school fees. An October amendment to the 2005 antihuman trafficking law strengthens the penalties for child sex trafficking offenses by removing the requirement to demonstrate elements of force, fraud, or coercion. Sex for grades was a pervasive problem in secondary schools, with many teachers forcing female students to exchange sexual favors for passing grades. The minimum age for consensual sex is 18. Statutory rape is a criminal offense that carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The penalty for conviction of child pornography is up to five years’ imprisonment. Orphaned children remained especially susceptible to exploitation, including sex trafficking.

On January 28, several media outlets reported that hundreds of women in Maryland County protested and demanded the government prosecute Raymond P.K. Bardio Jr., the son of a powerful prayer woman in Pleebo Sodoken District, for allegedly posting nude pictures of a young female student at Tubman University on social media. Authorities arrested Bardio, who remained detained awaiting trial at year’s end.

In August the plenary of the House of Representatives ordered Joseph Jake Brown, former assistant director for cybercrime and intelligence at the National Security Agency, incarcerated for three days at the Monrovia Central Prison and requested that the Ministries of Gender, Children, and Social Protection; Justice; and Labor and the National Security Agency investigate Brown’s alleged involvement in an

act of “child trafficking and sexual abuse” of a minor.

Infanticide or Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: There were no reports of infanticide.

According to the Ministry of Justice’s Human Rights Protection Unit, children with disabilities were often stigmatized, abandoned, neglected, and purposely exposed to risks (including death).

Displaced Children: Despite international and government attempts to reunite children separated from their families during the civil war, some street children, former child soldiers, and IDPs continued to live on the streets of Monrovia. Now adults, these homeless individuals – sleeping in the streets, dilapidated buildings, and tombs in cemeteries in and around central Monrovia – who often suffered from drug addiction and engage in crime, were referred to as “zogos” (boys) and “zogeas” (girls).

Institutionalized Children: Regulation of orphanages continued to be very weak, and many lacked adequate sanitation, medical care, and nutrition. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection did not monitor orphanages to ensure provision of basic services. Orphanages relied primarily on private donations and support from international organizations. Many orphans received little to no assistance.

The ministry continued to operate the Julue-Ta Interim Care Center in the GSA Community, Paynesville, a temporary shelter capable of accommodating approximately 30 vulnerable children of both genders, including abandoned and orphaned children, which provided for basic needs, including psychosocial (educational and recreational) support, until reunification with relatives.

Since the country did not have a designated facility for their care, juvenile offenders outside the Monrovia Central Prison were routinely held in separate cells in adult offender cellblocks (see section 1.c.). Guidelines existed and steps occasionally were taken to divert juveniles from the formal criminal justice system and place them in a variety of safe homes and “kinship” care situations.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague

Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Officials at the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Labor occasionally misapplied the term human trafficking to likely cases of international child abduction.

See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts against the country's small Jewish community.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The constitution prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, but these prohibitions were not always enforced. Most government buildings were not easily accessible to persons with mobility impairment. Sign language interpretation was often not provided for deaf persons in criminal proceedings or in the provision of state services. The Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection and the National Commission on Disabilities are the government agencies responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and implementing measures designed to improve respect for their rights.

On November 15, *The News* reported on eight-year-old Fanta Kromah, from the Dujar Road Community, in Palala, Bong County, who, since birth, suffered severe disabilities impairing her ability to communicate verbally and to move about freely. In an interview with Liberia News Agency, Fanta's mother, Kebbeh, stated that some community residents, as well as members of her own family, branded Fanta "a witch" and wished her dead.

In his December 3 remarks at the start of the country's two-day National Disability

Summit, organized by the National Commission on Disabilities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection and the Ministry of Finance, celebrating the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, President Weah said the government continued to embark upon programs intended to create equal access to health care services, education, and employment opportunities for all, including persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment, housing, access to all levels of education, and health care. Activists for persons with disabilities reported property owners often refused housing to persons with disabilities. According to the National Union of Organizations for the Disabled, persons with disabilities were more likely to become victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

Some persons with disabilities suffered inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

On September 10, the *Daily Observer* newspaper reported an assault on Abraham Salley, a visually impaired man, in the Red Light Market District. According to the report, Salley accidentally stepped on a man while trying to board a crowded bus, and the man beat Salley in response, leaving him with torn clothes and bruises. Police dismissed the case without further investigation because the man who allegedly assaulted Salley claimed he had a mental disability.

Few children with disabilities had access to education. Public educational institutions discriminated against students with disabilities, arguing resources and equipment were insufficient to accommodate them. Some students with disabilities attended a few specialized schools mainly for the blind and deaf, but only through elementary school. Students with more significant disabilities are exempt from compulsory education but may attend school subject to constraints on accommodating them. Few students with disabilities were able to attend either private or public schools.

Voting assistance in the November 16 House of Representatives by-elections in Bomi, Bong, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh Counties included the use of tactile ballots and permission for a trusted family member to accompany voters with disabilities,

but some voters without a family member or accompanied by children had difficulty voting.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

The law prohibits “discrimination and vilification on the basis of actual and perceived HIV status” in the workplace, school, and health facilities, with conviction of offenses punishable by a small fine.

The most recent LDHS (2019) found no measurable change since 2007 in popular attitudes, which remained broadly discriminatory, toward persons with HIV and AIDS. Because of such discrimination, many individuals were discouraged from testing for their HIV status, thus limiting HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment services.

Government ministries developed, adopted, and implemented several plans to combat social stigma and discrimination based on HIV status. The Ministry of Health supported training to make health-care facilities more receptive to key populations, held discussions and outreach sessions, and provided services through drop-in centers. The Ministry of Justice and police worked with civil society organizations to engage key populations.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits consensual same-sex sexual conduct. “Voluntary sodomy” is a misdemeanor with a penalty for conviction of up to one year’s imprisonment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) activists reported LGBTQI+ persons faced difficulty obtaining redress for crimes committed against them, including at police stations, because those accused of criminal acts used the victim’s LGBTQI+ status in defense of their crime.

LGBTQI+ persons continued to record instances of assaults, harassment, and hate speech by community members, but indicated that police were somewhat more responsive to their concerns.

On May 8, members of a community watch team allegedly beat three men on

suspicion they were gay in the Gobachop community of Paynesville. According to two of the victims, the community watch members threatened the three men and assaulted them, rendering one of the men unconscious. The Lesbian and Gay Association of Liberia (LEGAL) helped the victims report their case at the Zone 5 Police Depot in Duport Road as, according to the victims, they were afraid to report it in Gobachop due to further threats from the community watch team. On May 11, police arrested David Korboi Jr. and another suspect for the assault on the three men. According to LEGAL, the attackers were taken to the Paynesville magisterial court, where they were remanded to the Monrovia Central Prison, but LEGAL also noted it had received information that the attackers were subsequently released upon the orders of an unnamed influential person; independent corroboration was unavailable. LEGAL and the NGO Stop Aids in Liberia provided temporary employment to the victims as part of financial and psychological support.

Observers reported that three individuals in Karloken City, Maryland County, were attacked during the year because they were, or were suspected of being, transgender (or acting “feminine” or “like women”) and that the attackers were in police custody awaiting trial, but these reports were not independently confirmed.

LGBTQI+ victims were sometimes afraid to report crimes to police due to social stigma surrounding sexual orientation and rape as well as fear police would detain or abuse them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The HIV and AIDS team of the police and the Solidarity Sisters, a group of female police officers, undertook outreach to key communities, resolved disputes before they escalated, and helped other police officers respond to sensitive cases.

Authorities of the police’s Community Services Section noted improvements in obtaining redress for crimes committed against LGBTQI+ persons due to several training sessions on sexual and reproductive rights. Police sometimes ignored complaints by LGBTQI+ persons, but such activists noted improvements in treatment and protection from police after officers underwent advocacy, gender, safety, sexual and reproductive health, and security training.

LGBTQI+ persons faced discrimination in accessing housing, health care, employment, and education. There were several reports from activists that

property owners refused housing to members of the LGBTQI+ community by either denying applications or evicting residents from their properties.

There were press and civil society reports of harassment of persons based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, with some newspapers targeting the LGBTQI+ community. Hate speech was a persistent issue.

Influential figures, such as government officials and traditional and religious leaders, made public homophobic and transphobic statements. In June a 19-year-old high school student was expelled by Nyekan C. Wleh, principal of the Trinity United Methodist School in New Kru Town, after appearing dressed in drag in social media posts.

The Ministry of Health had a coordinator to assist minority groups, including LGBTQI+ persons, in obtaining access to health care and police assistance. Members of the LGBTQI+ community often called upon trained protection officers to intervene in cases of harassment and violence.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The penal code classifies mob violence as a crime. Nevertheless, mob violence and vigilantism, due in part to the public's lack of confidence in police and the judicial system, were common and often resulted in deaths and injuries. Although mob violence sometimes targeted alleged criminals, it was difficult to determine underlying reasons for attacks, since cases were rarely prosecuted. On April 20, hundreds of demonstrators blocked roads following the burning of the biggest warehouse in Ganta, Nimba County, reportedly destroying goods valued at more than 34 million Liberian dollars (\$222,000). The burning of the warehouse came a day after the 8th Judicial Circuit Court in Nimba County ruled in favor of Ganta resident Fred Suah against the Donzos, Sando, Koroma and Jabarteh families in a land dispute case that had lingered for more than 12 years. Some considered the burning of the warehouse to be tribal or religious violence. Following the destruction of the warehouse, an angry crowd gathered before the mosque in Ganta and threatened to set it ablaze before their plans were averted by police.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides workers, except public servants and employees of state-owned enterprises, the right to freely form or join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes or engage in “go-slow” (a protest by workers in which they deliberately work slowly). The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and allows unions to conduct their activities without interference by employers, parties, or government, but it does not provide adequate protection. The law provides, “All employers and workers in Liberia, without distinction whatsoever, may establish and join organizations of their own choosing, without prior authorization, and subject only to the rules of the organization concerned.” The law provides that labor organizations and associations have the right to draw up their constitutions and rules on electing their representatives, organizing their activities, and formulating their programs. There is no minimum number of workers needed, and foreigner and migrant members are not prohibited, although a long approval process or denial on arbitrary grounds could be hurdles to registration.

The government’s Labor Practices Review Board has the right to supervise trade union elections, which the International Confederation of Trade Unions termed an interference in a union’s right to organize its administration. Trade and labor unions are registered with, and licensed by, the Ministry of Labor, which represents the government in the labor and employment sector. The Bureau of Trade Union Affairs & Social Dialogue is the arm of the ministry that coordinates the activities of the social partners, trade unions, and employer organizations in the labor sector.

Public-sector employees and employees of state-owned enterprises are prohibited under the Civil Service Standing Orders from unionizing and bargaining collectively, but they may join associations and process grievances through the Civil Service Agency grievance board. The Standing Orders outlines the rules and regulations governing the conduct of the civil service as well as addressing issues affecting civil servants. Representatives from the Ministry of Labor, Liberia Labor Congress, and Civil Servants Association continued to argue the Standing Orders

conflict with Article 17 of the constitution, which affords the right to associate in trade unions. Some public-sector associations, including the National Teachers' Association of Liberia for public school teachers and the National Health Workers' Union of Liberia composed of public health workers, declared themselves to be unions despite the law, and the Liberia Labor Congress and Ministry of Labor backed their efforts to unionize.

By law parties engaged in essential services are also prohibited from striking. The law provides that the National Tripartite Council (comprising the Ministry of Labor, Liberian Chamber of Commerce, and Liberian Federation of Labor Unions) shall recommend to the minister all or part of a service to be an essential service if, in the opinion of the National Tripartite Council, the interruption of that service would endanger the life, personal safety, or health of the whole or any part of the population. As of year's end, the National Tripartite Council had not published a list of essential services. The act does not apply to public-sector workers, who are under the ambit of the Civil Service Standing Orders.

The law provides for the right of workers to conduct legal strikes, provided they have attempted and failed to resolve the dispute through conciliation within 30 days of the minister of labor receiving an application for referral to conciliation and have given the Ministry of Labor 48 hours' notice of their intent to strike. On matters of national security, the president may request the minister of labor to appoint a conciliator to mediate any dispute or potential dispute. The law prohibits unions from engaging in partisan political activity and prohibits agricultural workers from joining industrial workers' organizations. It also prohibits strikes if the disputed parties have agreed to refer the issue to arbitration, if the issue is already under arbitration or in court, and if the parties engage in essential services as designated by the National Tripartite Council.

Although the law prohibits antiunion discrimination and provides for reinstatement for workers dismissed for union activity, it allows for dismissal without cause if the company provides the mandated severance package. It does not prohibit retaliation against strikers whose strikes comply with the law if they commit "an act that constitutes defamation or a criminal offense, or if the proceedings arise from an employee being dismissed for a valid reason."

The government did not effectively enforce the law in every sector. The law does not provide adequate protection for strikers, and some protections depended on whether property damage occurred and was measurable. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays or appeals and to outside interference, such as bribes, coercion, and intimidation by politicians. According to the International Labor Organization, most union workers in an enterprise must be represented in order to engage in collective bargaining.

On July 6-7, Liberia Electric Corporation workers staged protests over several labor issues, including a reduction in salaries and alleged bad labor practices. The Ministry of Labor intervened by instituting measures to address workers' grievances. On July 19, a group of health workers demonstrated peacefully outside of the government-run referral hospital in the commercial city of Kakata in Margibi County to demand that the government pay outstanding salary arrears. On July 21, National Transit Authority employees staged a series of protests over several labor grievances, which included salary arrears.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, aside from compulsory prison labor that does not qualify as forced labor, or work defined as "minor communal service." The government did not effectively enforce the law. Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate. Criminal penalties were not commensurate with those for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping. Prosecution and conviction rates for trafficking, including forced labor, decreased during the year, and labor inspectors did not identify any child labor or trafficking victims.

Forced labor, including forced child labor, occurred. Families living in the interior of the country sometimes sent young women and children to live with relatives, acquaintances, or even strangers in Monrovia or other cities with the promise the women and children would pursue educational or other opportunities. In some instances these women and children were forced to work as street vendors, domestic servants, or beggars, or were exploited in commercial sex. There were

also credible reports of forced labor on small rubber plantations, family farms, and artisanal mines.

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law does not prohibit all the worst forms of child labor. Children were vulnerable to hazardous work because the government had not yet designated hazardous work categories, as stipulated by the law. The law prohibits most full-time employment of children younger than age. Children older than 13 but younger than 15 may be employed to perform “light work” for a maximum of two hours per day and not more than 14 hours per week. “Light work” is defined as work that does not prejudice the child’s attendance at school and is not likely to be harmful to a child’s health or safety and moral or material welfare or development as defined by law. There is an exception to the law for artistic performances, where the law leaves the determination of work hours to the minister of labor. Children 15 and older are not allowed to work more than seven hours a day or more than 42 hours in a week. There are mandatory rest periods of one hour, and a child may not work more than four hours consecutively. The law also prohibits the employment of children younger than 16 during school hours, unless the employer keeps a registry of the child’s school certificate to illustrate the child attended school regularly and can demonstrate the child was able to read and write simple sentences. The law prohibits the employment of apprentices younger than 16. The compulsory education requirement extends through grade nine or until age 15.

Gaps existed, however, in the legal framework to protect children adequately from the worst forms of child labor, including the one-year break between the compulsory education age and the minimum age for work. Additionally, the minimum age for work was not in compliance with international standards because it allows children younger than 16 to engage in work if it is outside of school hours, the employer keeps records of the child’s schooling, and the child is literate and attends school regularly. Because of these legal gaps, children of any age were vulnerable to child labor. Although the law prohibits children younger than 15 from working full time, it does not prevent children below this age from engaging

in part-time employment.

The law provides that an employer must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Labor before engaging a child in a proscribed form of labor. The ministry did not provide statistics on whether such permits were either requested or issued.

The government prohibits children younger than 18 from engaging in hazardous work but had not yet published a hazardous work list, leaving children vulnerable to hazardous work in certain sectors. The law penalizes employers who violate the minimum age provision of child labor laws and parents or guardians who violate this minimum age provision. According to the law, “A parent, caregiver, guardian, or relative who engages in any act or connives with any other person to subject a child to sexual molestation, prohibited child labor, or such other act that places the well-being of a child at risk is guilty of a second-degree felony.”

The National Commission on Child Labour, composed of representatives of the government, workers, and employers, as well as child advocacy groups and civil society organizations, engaged in efforts to create the necessary awareness of the danger and implications of child labor in the country. The commission is responsible for coordinating enforcement of child labor laws and policies but did not do so effectively. Labor inspectors were assigned to monitor and address child labor but were understaffed. The government charged the National Steering Committee for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor (National Child Labor Committee) with investigating and referring for prosecution allegations of child labor. The committee consists of the Ministry of Labor’s Child Labor Secretariat (which includes the National Commission on Child Labour); the Ministry of Justice’s Human Rights Protection Unit; the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection’s Human Rights Division; and the police’s Women’s and Children’s Protection Section. The government investigated seven cases and initiated prosecutions of two defendants, a decrease from 18 investigations and four prosecutions in 2020. Although the National Child Labor Committee convened regular meetings, coordination of their activities remained a serious problem. In 2019 the government released the *National Action Plan on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor*. The government did not identify specific funding to implement its provisions and expected the donor community to contribute approximately 60 percent of the total budget for eliminating child labor.

Child labor was widespread in almost every economic sector. In urban areas children assisted their parents as vendors in markets or hawked goods on the streets. There were reports that children tapped rubber on smaller plantations and private farms, which exposed them to hazardous conditions involving use of machetes and acids. Children also worked in other conditions likely to harm their health and safety, such as rock crushing or work that required carrying heavy loads. Children were engaged in hazardous labor in alluvial diamond and gold mining, which exposed them to heavy loads and hazardous chemicals. Children were also engaged in agriculture, hunting, and fishing. Some children in Monrovia, particularly girls, worked in domestic service after being sent from rural communities by their parents or guardians. There were also reports of children working in auto shops.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, color, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation or gender identity, or HIV and AIDS status. It does not address refugee or stateless status. The law calls for equal pay for equal work. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Penalties were not commensurate with those for similar violations and were seldom applied. Mechanisms for receiving and acting on complaints were inadequate, and the government took no efforts to strengthen antidiscrimination regulations.

Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to gender, disability, HIV-positive status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Women experienced economic discrimination based on cultural traditions discouraging their employment outside the home in rural areas. Anecdotal evidence indicated that women's pay lagged that for men. LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disabilities faced hiring discrimination, and persons with disabilities faced difficulty with workplace access and accommodation (see section 6). Persons with disabilities lacked equal access to social, economic, and political opportunities and were among the most vulnerable population groups in the country.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law establishes minimum wages for unskilled laborers and for formal-sector workers. The law also allows workers in the informal sector to bargain for a wage higher than the legal minimum.

The minimum wage was greater than the World Bank's poverty income level. Many families paid minimum-wage incomes were also engaged in subsistence farming, artisanal mining, small-scale marketing, street peddling, and begging.

The law provides for a 48-hour, six-day regular workweek with a one-hour rest period for every five hours of work. The law stipulates that ordinary hours may be extended by collective agreement up to an average of 53 hours during an agreed period, as well as to 56 hours for workers in seasonal industries. The law provides for overtime pay and prohibits excessive compulsory overtime. The law provides for at least one week of paid leave per year and for severance benefits.

Occupational Safety and Health: Occupational health and safety standards were up to date and appropriate for the intended industries. Workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, and authorities did not effectively protect employees in this situation. For certain categories of industries, the law requires employers to employ safety and health officers and establish a safety and health committee in the workplace.

The government did not effectively enforce the law in all sectors. The Ministry of Labor's Labor Inspection Department is responsible for enforcing government-established wage, hour, and health and safety standards in the formal sector, but there is no system for monitoring and enforcement in the informal sector. The government did not employ a sufficient number of labor inspectors to enforce compliance. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for similar crimes. Observers reported labor inspectors solicited and took bribes to certify compliance with regulations, and the labor inspectorate did not track numbers of individual inspections or violations.

The country did not keep records of industrial accidents, but evidence pointed to mining, construction, forestry, fishing, and agriculture as the most dangerous

sectors. Hazardous occupations were especially dangerous in the informal sector, such as illegal fishing, logging, and mining, where the lack of regulation and remediation contributed to fatalities and obscured accountability.

On August 18, at least seven persons were injured at the Sethi Ferro Fabrik Incorporated modern steel manufacturing company in Gardnersville following an explosion at the facility. According to eyewitnesses, the explosion occurred following a surge to an electric induction arc furnace that was being used to melt steel by one of the workers at the facility. The Environmental Protection Agency and Liberia National Police arrived on the scene to assess and investigate the cause of the explosion and its effect on the environment.

On August 21, Emmanuel Joe, an employee of the Liberia Agriculture Company in Wee Statutory District, Grand Bassa County, was killed by a rubber processing machine when a breaker was reportedly turned on by another worker while the victim was cleaning it.

Informal Sector: Most citizens were unable to find work in the formal sector and therefore did not benefit from any of the formal labor laws and protections. Most citizens (estimated at 80 percent) worked in the largely unregulated informal sector, where they faced widely varying and often harsh working conditions. Informal-sector workers included rock crushers, artisanal miners, agricultural workers, street sellers, most market sellers, domestic workers, and others. In the diamond and gold mines, in addition to physical danger and poor working conditions, the industry is unregulated, leaving miners vulnerable to exploitive brokers, dealers, and intermediaries. Illegal mining of gold was rampant throughout the country and posed serious safety risks, resulting in the deaths of several persons every year.